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CHRISTIANITY AT THE GRAVE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

BY FREDERIC HARRISON.

WE are entering on the last lap of another hundred years, as the centuries encircle the growth of nations in swift revolving eras. Let us ask: "Is life growing nobler and purer? Does religion inspire the heart? Are we coming nearer to the just, the loving, the beautiful, the true? As we look back over the nineteenth century, is it so glorious an advance upon the eighteenth, or, indeed, upon the seventeenth?" In population, in huge cities, in area of dominion, in wealth, in material prosperity, in mechanical inventions, in physical discoveries, in all forms of material resources—in these, the advance has been portentous. But is humanity measured by these material things, by power, by wealth?

I am not making any barren comparison of one century with another. And I doubt if, even within the narrow limits of a single nation, the general progress of mankind can be turned back, unless in rare and exceptional cases. I am a convinced believer in the gradual improvement of civilization, when we judge it by areas and epochs sufficiently wide and typical. In all progress there are oscillations, partial degenerations, and local or temporary ailments. But I must profess my conviction—and I hear the same confessed by the best men and women, day by day—that our immediate generation has been sinking of late to meaner ideals, to coarser ways of life, to more vulgar types of literature and art, to more open craving after wealth, and a more insolent assertion of pride and force.

As I look back over the present reign, it seems to me clear that the later years have a lower tone of truth and of honor than that we remember in the earlier and middle years of this period. With all the blunders, wrongs and delusions of the earlier times,

our people had some finer inspirations, and more generous impulses for ends which were not wholly selfish or mercenary. In my boyhood there began that long, complicated and indefatigable series of movements to improve the condition of the people, to lift up the burdens of the poor, to reform our entire financial system in the interest of the masses by casting the burdens on the rich—the long labor to secure Free Trade, cheap food, factory legislation, legislation for the rescue of the young, for the education of the people, Poor Law reform, sanitary reform, law reform—causes associated with the names of Peel, Cobden, Bright, Gladstone, Shaftesbury, Brougham, Russell, Stanley, Chadwick, Foster, Mill, and many more. I am not referring to any special legislation or agitation, nor do I say that it was all wise, or wholly disinterested. I mean that all these various changes in our political and social system were pressed on with an unselfish desire to make the world better, with a genuine enthusiasm for what was good and right in itself, which has more or less died out of us to-day.

The great religious upheaval associated with the name of John Henry Newman was a thing both deeper and more spiritual than the petty squabble to-day about vestments and incense. There was a generous sympathy with the independence of nations, and practical abhorrence of international oppression. We felt to the heart the griefs of Poles, of Hungarians, of Lombards and Venetians. The heart of the people was wrung to its fibre by a brotherly interest in the great crisis of the United States. The Crimean war, even if it were a blunder and an illusion, was entered upon with a genuine resolve to protect the weak against the strong. I am far from pretending to justify or extol all that was done in the first half of the present reign. But in those days what stirred the heart of our people were those strivings after well being, peace, and freedom at home and abroad, and not the ignoble passion to domineer and to grasp, to pile up wealth and to make a bigger Empire, to beat our rivals in trade and in arms.

Nor is it only that our national sympathies and enthusiasm have grown colder and coarser, but there has come over us a positive turn for vulgarity of thought, manners and taste. We seem to be declining on what the poet calls “a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart” than of old. It is a common observation that the widowhood and retirement of the Queen have been fol-

lowed by a deplorable decline in the simplicity, purity, and culture which marked the dominant society in the days of her married life. Fashion, as it is called, is now at the mercy of any millionaire gambler, or any enterprising Monte Cristo from across the seas. Victorian literature is declining into the "short story" and the "problem play," taking its heroines from among women with a past and its heroes from the slums. In prose and in verse, the favorite style is the Cockney slang of the costermonger, the betting ring, and the barrack canteen. The reek of the pot-house, the music hall, the turf, the share-market, the thieves' fence, infects our literature, our manners, our amusements, and our ideals of life. The note of the "smart" world is to bluster about guns, war-ships, race-horses, and Rand shares, in the jargon that is current at a race-course.

Any general debasement of tone must have some determining cause. And the causes of this debasement are, as usual, somewhat mixed, and are partly material and partly spiritual. To begin with the material, it cannot be denied that a great change came over the world when it witnessed the triumph of the Bismarckian policy, by which the map of Europe was transformed thirty years ago. The defeat and dismemberment of Denmark, followed by the defeat of Austria and the reorganization of Germany, and this crowned by the overthrow of France and the conquest of two of her provinces with a huge sum of money, raised Prussia in seven years from the fourth place of Continental Powers to the acknowledged primacy in the first rank. But it did much more. It started a wonderful development of financial, commercial and colonial expansion. For the first time in this century, war had been made "to pay." Industry had been nourished by war. A tremendous war was followed by unexampled national prosperity. It was a policy avowedly of "Blood and Iron," of force and ambition; of might without right. It mocked at moral considerations as foolish sentiment. Its creed was the good old rule, the simple plan—"Take what you can." "To the victors the spoils!"

The previous wars in Europe, since the fall of Napoleon, had all been professedly waged to protect some people from oppression, for defence against aggression, not of avowed offence and conquest. And they had all been the sources of distress and heavy burdens even to the victor. But here was a series of three

wars in succession, which were hardly disclaimed as wars of conquest, which had been followed by prosperity in leaps and bounds, and had raised the nation in eight years to the primacy of Europe, of a kind that might demand a century of progress in less violent ways. From the grossly material point of view, it was an astonishing success. Upon Prince Bismarck's death, the repulsive side of the reviews of his career lay in this, that no one thought anything of the question if it were right or wrong, just or unjust, beneficent or retrograde; to them all it seemed, however barbarous from the point of view of morality and civilization, a splendid and typical success. To doubt this was "unctuous rectitude."

Bismarck set the fashion in statesmanship; he did not long wait for imitators and rivals. One after another, the nations of Europe started rather poor copies of the Blood and Iron invention. It was taken up like a new machine-gun. Disraeli was one of the first to try the new weapon. He started the Jingo fever in the Turko-Russian war, the "forward" policy in Afghanistan and Cyprus, and he added to the historic crown of England the tawdry paste jewel of Empire. He founded Imperialism, which has grown since like a Upas tree, and has poisoned Conservatives, Whigs and Radicals alike. Mr. Gladstone himself, with many reserves and various excuses, fell under the spell of it at last, and Mr. Gladstone's successor is now one of the chief prophets of the new Mahdism. British statesmen, to be just, were shy of resorting to the "Blood and Iron" weapon in Europe; but they made an excessive use of it in Colonial and Oriental regions. And in Egypt, the Soudan, in Central Africa, on the Congo and the Niger, in Uganda, in Chitral, Burmah and China they raised the cry, year after year, of Imperial expansion and trade profits, new markets and the Union Jack.

The whole world followed the Bismarckian lead. Russia, from whom, perhaps, the famous Chancellor originally imported his great idea, had an irresistible destiny in that direction, as the largest, most populous, least civilized nation in Europe. Austria, even, added to all her difficulties by another big annexation in the Balkan peninsula. Italy, in spite of her bankruptcy and dynastic weakness, must needs clutch at a province on the Red Sea. France could not be left out, and must make the tricolor wave over part of Siam, Tonquin, Madagascar, the Niger, and at last the Nile. Japan, and even little Greece, took up the Imperial

mania. And at last the United States forsook their settled rules and policy, and are starting an Empire across the ocean.

And then Mammon would not be behind Moloch, but resolved to show that Blood and Iron meant good business, as well as glory. Gigantic speculations were started in all parts of the planet, railways across whole continents, mines which produced the income and wielded the resources of an average State, plantations and settlements as big as many a great kingdom. And all these were put upon a footing that was half military—like an ocean liner constructed to be used as an armed cruiser. Trade and business, war and conquest, were mixed up in equal shares. Under some charter, or other guarantee of complicity, from the State, the adventurers issued forth to fill their pockets, to beat down rivals, and extend the Empire in a kind of nondescript enterprise, which was partly commercial, partly imperial, partly buccaneering, but wholly immoral and perilous to peace. It was somewhat like those piratical enterprises under Drake and Raleigh, in the days of Elizabeth, when the Queen and her courtiers took shares in buccaneering adventures to plunder the people of Spain without declaring war.

The opening of the vast continent of Africa by missionaries, hunters and prospectors set all Europe on fire, much as the discovery of the wealth of the West Indies and South America led to the wild scramble for trans-Atlantic empires in the age of Elizabeth. European nations rushed in to fight for the spoils and enslave the natives. And, as usual, the English people secured the lion's share of the loot, with abundant jealousy and hatred from their distanced competitors. Ruby mines, diamond mines, gold mines, ivory, rubber, oil, or cotton served from time to time to attract investors and to float gigantic adventures. As if the very Spirit of Evil had been commissioned to tempt our generation, like as Job was tempted in the poem, the era of this Saturnalia of Blood and Iron in Europe was the moment when enormous discoveries of precious stones and metals were revealed to the gloating eyes of avarice and ambition. The pair fell upon the mines like furies, the one shouting out Gold, the other Empire, and aroused a national delirium for wealth and dominion. Already, the Spirit of Evil seems to have begun his work of slaughter and loss, as when Job in his distress cried out, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.” But are we so sure

that death and loss will be made good to us in the end, as amply as it was made good to Job?

These various events all coincided with the last quarter of the century now about to end. If we needed a date for this great change in our national and industrial life, I would take, as a symbol, the proclamation of the Queen as Empress of India. It was a mere form, without direct effect in itself. But it served as the baptism of the new Imperialism. The British flag henceforth represented an Empire of conquest and annexation, on the lines of that Russian Empire which, in the middle of the century, Europe had combined to check and humble. The Imperial title was a bauble in itself; but it symbolized the ambition of the men who arranged it. Cyprus was seized out of mere bravado. On the Imperial banner was inscribed the famous motto, "*Peace with Honor;*" on the obverse of which scroll was deeply graven, "*War with Disgrace.*" And the vulgar thing with a vulgar name, which is the new religion of the Imperialist, was bred in a Cockney music-hall. The Transvaal was annexed by a snatch decree; the Zulu war followed; then the Afghan war and the "Forward" policy of our ardent proconsuls and the Young India party. Governments and parties changed; but not the policy. Egypt was seized; and in eighteen years it has cost us no less than six campaigns. Burmah was conquered and annexed. The rush to the diamond mines is hardly thirty years old; the rush to the gold mines about half of thirty; the Charterland is not ten years old, and it has led to two or three wars, including the Raid.

Analyze its degrading effects on the mind and temper of the nation. Compare the early part and the middle of the reign of the Queen with the last two or three decades. Who will dare to say that its close can compare with its promise—in poetry, in romance, in literature, in philosophy, or in science? Allow what we will for the personal equation whereby the elder naturally looks back to the memories of the *temporis acti*, grant all the tendency we have to be slow to recognize latent genius in the budding, still it would be dishonest to claim for recent years an intellect as powerful and as solid as that which we knew in the middle of the reign. I insist on no particular writer, I rely on no special school. Names will occur to all—Dr. Arnold and his son, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Macaulay, Carlyle, Thackeray, Dickens, Bulwer, Disraeli, Hallam, Milman, Freeman, Froude, Ruskin, the

Brontës, George Eliot, Kingsley, Trollope. All the work, or all the best and permanent work, of these was completed and had passed into the fabric of English literature before the Imperialist era began some twenty-five years ago. Have their successors quite equalled them?

It is the same story in more abstract things—in philosophy, in sociology, even in pure science, the special pursuit of our age. Charles Darwin, Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Professor Owen, Thomas Huxley, John Henry Newman, Pusey, Keble, Grote, Whewell, Kelvin, Lyell, Thirlwall, Buckle, Wilberforce, Jowett, Maurice, Bagehot, Martineau. Two or three out of the forty names I have mentioned survive in extreme old age; but even of these their principal work was completed at the date now taken. I do not deny that many men of high distinction are living and working still, and that there are still with us men of great promise, of whom much is expected. But taking, as a test, influence upon the age and European reputation, the last quarter of the present century cannot compare in its intellectual product with the three earlier quarters of this century.

It would be futile, of course, to admit the current nonsense about “decadence” or “the end of the century”; for the tone of a nation does not degenerate of its own motion, nor by the date of the calendar. It has a cause, and the cause is plain. No! when Imperialism set in about a quarter of a century ago, we all took to a much more practical, combative, and materialistic view of life. We were told to get rich, to fight, to win the game, and the game was something solid and substantial. To be weak was to be miserable, as Satan told the rebel angels; to be poor was to be a failure; to make no conquests, no prizes, no fortunes, was to own oneself a poor thing. Competition ruled everything—education, sport, industry and literature. To win prizes we had to be up-to-date, and we grew year by year more up-to-date. We fell more and more under the rule of the newspaper press; and the press grew more and more noisy, braggart, bustling and smart. It got so furiously up-to-date that it even announced events before they had happened, and smashed books before they had been read. We all had to live in a perpetual rattle, which was something like a fair or a race-course, and something like an army of volunteers on a bank holiday. The reveries of the imagination became less easy, and fell out of fashion. The pace became kill-

ing. Stories became shorter and shorter, and no one had time for a long book. The "boss," the "gold-bug," the "syndicate" were terms imported from across the seas, and with the terms came the things. The press fell into the hands of the "bosses," then "society" fell; and soon the State itself began to be run by the millionaires, much as if it were a railway or a trust in the United States.

All this combined to materialize, to degrade, the national life. It is not so much that we have glaring examples of folly, vice, extravagance, brutality, and lust. There are such examples in most ages, and they may be personal, independent of any general cause. The gloomy feature of our time is the wide diffusion of these evils amongst all classes, and, what is far worse, the universal dying down of high standards of life, of generous ideals, of healthy tastes—the recrudescence of coarse, covetous, arrogant, and braggart passions. We who live quiet lives, far apart from what calls itself the great world, have no direct experience of these things; but we cannot resist the common testimony of those who know that, during the reign of the Queen, wanton extravagance in dress, in living, in gayeties, has never been so crazy as now, with such sordid devices to scrape together the means for extravagance, such open sale of rank and person by those who claim to lead society and to dictate taste.

In such a world, it is inevitable that the intellectual and aesthetic aims should become gross and materialized. The drama runs not merely to vice, but to morbid, sneaking forms of vice, to unwholesome melodrama, to a world of smart harlots and titled debauchees. The least vicious, but most vulgar, symptom of this decadence, is the prevalent fondness of men and women of fashion for the slang of the gutter and the slum. Popular novels, songs, and plays are composed in the jargon current amongst costermongers and thieves. Romance tends to vignettes of sensationalism, to the more cancerous forms of debauchery, and to prurient maunderings over sex problems. It may be true that there have been ages more vicious and brutal than our own; and, no doubt, the last years of the Victorian epoch are no worse than the Georgian epoch of Hogarth and Fielding. That is not my argument. My contention is, that there is to-day, as compared with the middle of the present reign, a sensible debasement of tone.

I have spoken of the material and practical causes of this

deterioration of the age. I will say a few words as to its spiritual and intellectual causes. All important changes in the world of action are preceded by profound movements in the world of thought. The intellectual “reversion” to a poorer type, in these recent years, is due to a certain despairing return to the cloudy intuitionism which, fifty years ago, had fallen into discredit. Forty or fifty years ago, the schools of Bentham and his followers, as presented in the *Westminster Review*, of James Mill and John Stuart Mill, of Professor Bain and George H. Lewes, of Herbert Spencer and his followers, of Grote and Cornewall Lewis, eminently that of Charles Darwin and the popularization of the philosophy of evolution, and, finally, the critical examination of Scripture, which was made common knowledge in “Essays and Reviews”—all these had established their ascendant in the world of serious thought, and raised hopes of almost indefinite progress and authority. It was an intellectual emancipation which had some kinship with that of the last century, in the age of Hume, Adam Smith, Voltaire, and Diderot. We may call it the Avatar of Evolution and of Logical Demonstration. And under it a brilliant efflorescence arose—in philosophy, in science, in economics, in sociology, and in real religion.

The philosophy of Evolution and of Demonstration promised, but it did not perform. It raised hopes, but it led to disappointment. It claimed to explain the world, and to direct man. But it left a great blank. That blank was the whole field of religion, of morality, of the sanctions of duty. It left the mystery of the Future as mysterious as ever, and yet as imperative as ever. Whatever philosophy of Nature it offered, it gave no adequate philosophy of Man. It was busy with physiology of Humanity; it propounded inconceivable and repulsive guesses about the origin of Humanity. Charles Darwin thought that “he was generally, but not always, an Agnostic.” Stuart Mill fluctuated between a religion of Duty and a very attenuated and sterilized Theism. And Herbert Spencer solemnly announced that the object of religion could only be the Unknowable. Hesitations, doubtings, double acrostics like this about the very central truths of life and duty, naturally caused plain men and women to turn away in disgust. Here we say that certain intelligible, rational ideas about the religious problems of Man’s highest nature form the very key-stone of philosophy; that the philosopher who

fails to answer these problems, so as to convince his questioners, will convince them ultimately of little else. Evolution and Neo-Christianity failed to give any answer; called themselves "Know-nothings," prophets of the Unknowable; had not made up their own minds, and did not think it mattered much whether they did or not. The result was a wide and general discredit to the entire philosophy of Evolution and the entire Theology of Neo-Christianity.

No precise date could be given to this reaction, nor did it take any single or definite form. No new type of philosophy took the place of the discredited methods. Within the last twenty years these latter have been gradually losing their hold; and vague, thin kinds of Spiritualism from time to time found acceptance. There was nothing like a new system, or even a definable tendency, except a kind of metaphysical fogginess which uses grandiloquent phrases as if they were real things. If we took any date as a mark, it might be found in the burst of welcome when Mr. Balfour's graceful book on "The Foundations of Belief" appeared about five years ago. There was nothing either new or solid in the book, except the pathetic dreaminess with which cynical pessimism and incurable doubt about all Truth was shown to lead up to practical support of the Orthodox Creeds. That the guides of public opinion announced this stale scepticism as giving new life to philosophy and religion, was indeed evidence how deeply the orthodox creeds were undermined, how ready was the philosophy of the day to clutch hold of any cloud that seemed likely to release it from sober study of the earth. All this was a sort of theological "confidence trick." The philosopher says to the simple inquirer: "You are so very little sure of any belief, and are so likely to lose it altogether in this Babylon of ours, that you had better trust me with your faith, and I will put it away safe in the Bank of the Church of England."

A maudlin philosophy based on nothing but vague aspirations, hopes, and possibilities, so that all the central problems of Life and of Man ended in the general formula, "After all, perhaps there may be;" this spread a dry-rot through the mental fabric. There is to-day plenty of activity, of ingenuity, of prettiness, of skill, as there is in any silver age; but of robustness, originality, inspiration, is there to-day as much as we have known and felt a generation or two ago? Take the decade which closes this cen-

tury, can any man pretend that it equals in power either of the middle decades of the century (1840-1860) in poetry, in literature, in science, in philosophy? A shifty and muddle-headed kind of Spiritualism has mentally made cowards of us all.

And, finally, to take religion, which we are often told displays so striking a revival. In ceremonial, in ecclesiastical celebrations, in clerical organization and activity, no doubt the progress is manifest. The rites of the Churches, the dignity of worship, the parade of Church societies, are in full activity. The Churches were never more "in evidence" than they are to-day. Their pretensions were never higher; their rolls never fuller; their patrons never more illustrious. Is vital religion more general, more effective? Is genuine belief in the creeds more definite and clear? Is Christianity more truly a civilizing, a moralizing force? Who will dare to say so? By vital religion I do not mean conventional phrases about getting to Heaven. I mean religion that can purify, direct, and inspire Man's life on earth. By genuine belief in the creeds, I mean literal acceptance of the three creeds in the Book of Common Prayer in their plain sense. When I ask if Christianity is a civilizing and moralizing force, I ask if it prevents us as a people from injustice and oppression, and as men and women from the pride of life and the lusts of the flesh.

We have been dwelling to-day on the evil things in our modern life, on the chase after money, the rampant love of gambling, the extravagance, the coarseness, the materialistic spirit growing on all sides. What have the Churches done to purify and check all this? Who would care if they did try? Who would believe them in earnest in doing so? What were they doing and saying yesterday? They were offering up, from ten thousand altars, prayers to the God of Battles to bless our arms, that is to enable us to slaughter our enemies and possess their land. Not a voice comes from the official churches to raise a doubt as to the justice, good faith, and Christian charity of those who have thrust England into a wanton war of spoliation. Not a word is breathed from their pulpits of respect for the brave civilians who are defending their homes and their freedom. These republicans, we are told, gather round their hearthstones, whole families together, fathers, sons, grandsons, kneeling down in prayer—they do sincerely believe in their God and his readiness to hear them—and their wives, sisters, and daughters arm them for the front: and ere they engage in

battle, their camp rings with hymns of prayer and praise. At home, our own preparation for war is sounded in slang from drinking saloons, which is echoed back in pale and conventional litanies from the altars of the State Church. This is how Christianity works out in practice at the close of the nineteenth century.

This State Church and the Creed, to the husk of which it still clings, never seem so hollow or so corrupt as in the part they play in some national crisis, such as an unjust war. Whilst sober men of all parties and opinions can feel some doubt or even searchings of heart; whilst soldiers, statesmen, and the public are open to remonstrance; the only order of men which is ever ready to supply the majority with hypocritical glozings is the official priesthood. It sinks till it becomes the mere domestic chaplain of the governing class—a sort of black police that has to stand by the government, right or wrong. “Theirs not to reason why,” as the poet says. It was an Archbishop who told us, the other day, that God Himself “made battles.” Improving upon the old Hebrew war-songs about the God of Battles, we are now told that the God of Mercy is the author of war, as a means of grace toward a higher morality. Why, no medicine man, no witch-finder in Central Africa, hounding on a savage chief to exterminate a neighboring tribe, would utter a more atrocious blasphemy!

A Church, a Creed, which can chant such a requiem as this over the grave of the Nineteenth Century needs trouble us no more. It is left, henceforth, to faith in humanity to do what it can to curb the passions of the strong, who are thirsting to crush the weak; to teach what is the true glory of civilized men; to preach the Gospel of Peace, which the apostate preachers of Christ have turned into a by-word, and have made a war cry. These high priests of the New Imperialism have forsaken their own religion and forgotten their own sacred books. Let them turn back in their Bibles to the story of Ahab and Naboth, and reflect that it was the apostate priests who leaped upon the altar, and called from morning even until noon, saying, “O, Baal, hear us!” But it was the task of the true priest to say to the King in his pride, “Hast thou killed and also taken possession?”

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